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Summary

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Evaluating the Impact of Access to Work: A Case Study Approach

Access to Work aims to reduce inequalities between disabled people and non-disabled people in the workplace. The programme helps with the costs of support workers, travel to work, alterations to workplace premises and aids and equipment.

The research aimed to assess the difference the programme makes to disabled people taking up and staying in work and to estimate whether the same outcomes would have resulted without it. Combining qualitative interview techniques with agreement scales, the researchers asked users and their employers to judge what would have happened if Access to Work were not available. As users often receive more than one support element, question modules were developed for each.

A purposive sample was drawn from respondents to a 2000 Access to Work survey. 87 case studies were achieved, comprising interviews with users and their employers and extracts from case records. There were interviews with a further 30 users.

Main findings

- There is strong evidence from users that Support Worker provision can be essential to take up a job. Around one in four already established in work would have given up working altogether if Support Workers had not been available when they applied, and their employers generally agreed. Almost half of Support Worker users were completely or fairly certain that they would lose their job without it. It appears particularly effective in enabling disabled people to work on an equal footing with non-disabled colleagues and in supporting self-employment.
- There is particularly strong evidence that Travel to Work provision is essential to taking up a job and very important in sustaining employment. Around one in four users saw a strong possibility of losing their job without it, and employers tended to agree. Travel to Work can affect employment outcomes by increasing work standards and reliability and reducing sick leave.
- Alterations to Premises made a direct difference to employment where medical conditions put the job at risk and where environmental barriers made taking up a job completely impossible. The main contribution was to increase equality of access, not necessarily directly affecting employment.
- Aids and Equipment funding could be an important factor in taking up work if employers were uncertain about paying. Fifteen per cent of Aids and Equipment users believed they would lose their job without the Access to Work support. Less sick leave and improved work performance were important outcomes for users and employers.
- Taking account of all their support elements, 35 per cent of respondents rated it highly unlikely that they would be in their job without Access to Work while 28 per cent rated it highly likely. The impact was highest for people whose support package included Travel to Work and lowest for those who had Aids and Equipment. Almost half of employers believed their employee would be in the job without Access to Work.

Executive Summary

Support Workers

Full interviews were obtained with 19 Support Worker users and 12 employer representatives. Support levels ranged from 12 hours a year to full-time, and costs from £300 to £24,000.

Support Worker users stressed the difference the support made to them. Participation at work and social inclusion, independence and control, and enhanced career chances were emphasised. The support could be the key to running a self-employed business in the way open to a non-disabled person. It could bring health gains that made the difference between staying in work and giving up. It also showed that disabled people can work on an equal footing and helped to reduce prejudice.

Without a Support Worker, getting any job would have been impossible for most users, and some might even have given up looking for work altogether. Around one in four people established in work when they applied felt that they would have given up working altogether, and their employers generally agreed. Almost half were completely or fairly certain that they would lose their job without the support. Getting the support needed from other people at work was usually impossible and unacceptable to most. Only one user was confident that the employer could have found an acceptable alternative.

Employers are not required to pay towards the costs. No employer agreed wholeheartedly that the organisation would pay the full costs, but some might have paid a proportion. Employers were concerned about ongoing costs if several staff used Support Worker provision. The point was made that shifting costs to employers would make disabled people disproportionately expensive to employ. Some users stressed the responsibility of government to promote

equality of opportunity. Users felt asking an employer to pay would emphasise impairment and difference, prejudice employment chances, affect relations at work or reduce felt independence.

Travel to Work

Thirty-six people who had received help with taxi fares or the costs of being driven to work and 27 employers were interviewed. The approved annual costs of Travel to Work ranged up to £10,700.

For many users, the fundamental difference Travel to Work made was being able to get to their job, as alternatives were rarely feasible. Arriving reliably on time and ready for work was valued by both users and employers. Users felt that, with Travel to Work, their health was not jeopardised by the stress, risk and fatigue of exhausting journeys, and concentration and quality of work were enhanced by relief from worry and distraction. Not being out of pocket by going to work also made substantial differences to the viability of employment.

There was strong evidence from users that Travel to Work was essential to taking up a job. Being able to assure prospective employers that getting to work was not a problem gave job applicants confidence and credibility. Several users saw a strong possibility of losing their job without Travel to Work, and their employers tended to agree. A striking finding is the likelihood of taking more sick leave in the absence of Travel to Work.

Employers are not required to pay towards the costs. Few users saw any possibility of their employer paying for taxis, although the idea was acceptable to many. Few employers thought paying was likely. The financial impact on the organisation was considered unacceptable, especially as a

precedent would be set. Users normally pay the equivalent public transport costs. For most, the full cost was unaffordable when they applied, although a minority thought this would have been a possibility. Acceptability was generally rated low, for financial reasons and because it seemed unfair to have to pay extra to go to work.

Alterations to Premises

Fifteen people for whom alterations to the building had been made and 11 employers were interviewed. The most common alteration was to toilet facilities. Costs ranged up to £10,000.

Alterations appeared to have the greatest impact on people who developed health problems which put their job at risk, but could also be indispensable to disabled people taking up work. Disabled people who did not have health problems affecting their work mostly had been working for some time before the alteration was made. The benefits to them lay mainly in easier and more equal access in the workplace. Working without the alterations could have been tiring and sometimes demeaning but not intolerable for people determined to work. Some users felt they could have carried on without it with no serious negative effect on their work, health or well-being.

Employers are required to make a financial contribution where the user is taking up the job. Employers' ratings of the possibility of paying the full costs ranged widely. Most felt they would '*find some way*' to pay if Access to Work were not available. Only two were clear that the organisation would pay because of a policy to make adaptations. Employers generally seemed to accept the principle of paying, sometimes acknowledging benefits to other staff, students or customers, though expertise to make appropriate alterations could be lacking. Where users had previously appeared to manage without the alterations some

employers were less inclined to find paying acceptable.

Not all users were happy with the idea of their employer paying. Feeling obligated to the employer and the effect on relationships were factors. Some felt that responsibility should lie with government, others that employers had a duty to their employees.

Aids and Equipment

Special Aids and Equipment is the largest element, and 76 current and 11 past users and 66 employers were interviewed. Support included ergonomic chairs and workstation equipment, IT-related equipment and software, communication and mobility aids, and special tools. Four in ten packages cost under £1000.

The availability of Aids and Equipment rarely influenced people to take up a new job but could be an important factor in the few cases where employers were doubtful about making a job offer.

Giving up work altogether at the time they applied, had Aids and Equipment not been available, was inconceivable to most, although one in ten would pretty definitely have done so. Employers were generally more pessimistic. The equipment was important to stay in the job now, and 15 per cent felt certain they would lose their job without it. Their employers tended to be less pessimistic. It seems that having seen the benefits employers were more inclined to find other solutions to keep the person in the job. Less sick leave and improved work performance were important outcomes.

One in three users said they were highly unlikely to carry on without Aids and Equipment, having experienced less pain, more equal participation or more efficient working. Among those who said they would have carried on were people who needed the equipment so much that they would have bought it themselves, and

people who thought their employer would now provide it. Some valued the extra comfort and convenience they had, but thought of this as an 'extra', and some people said their condition had now improved.

Employers are required to pay a contribution unless the user is taking up the job. Four in ten employers agreed completely that the organisation would have paid for all the support at the time of application, if Access to Work were not available. Employers were overall more cautious about agreeing that the organisation would pay at the time of the interview. Employers sometimes felt that they might be forced into lower quality provision, or a slimmed down package of support, should they have to bear the full costs, and some commented that delays would be inevitable if they had to negotiate internal funding. Some organisations lacked expertise in finding the right solution for an employee, and they valued this aspect of Access to Work.

Over half of users found the idea of the employer paying completely acceptable. Many commented that employers have a duty to provide equipment appropriate for the job. Paying for all their equipment when they applied would have been completely impossible for nearly half of users, while one in three saw a distinct possibility. Paying was unacceptable to most. However, the possibility of paying now seemed higher to current users. Having felt the benefits, they were reluctant to lose them, and some felt better off financially.

The overall impact of Access to Work

All users in paid work were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 100 the likelihood of being in their job if Access to Work were not available, taking account of the contribution of the different types of support they received.

Fourteen percent of respondents opted for the middle score, indicating no strong opinion either way. Scores concentrate at the end points of the scale: 23 per cent estimated they would 'absolutely not' be in their job without Access to Work and 19 per cent judged they 'definitely' would be in their job. If scores within ten points of each pole are included, 35 per cent of respondents rated it highly unlikely that they would be in their job without Access to Work while 28 per cent rated it as highly likely. It is clear that deadweight in the Travel to Work element is very low while that in Aids and Equipment appears rather high.

Employers were considerably more positive, with almost half of the employer respondents agreeing completely that their employee would be in the job without Access to Work and only eight per cent totally disagreeing. Employers' judgements variously reflect a view that determined individuals would not give up, a commitment to equal opportunities, a will to retain valued employees, openness to looking for alternative ways of meeting needs and an optimism that funds could be found to substitute, in least in part, for Access to Work support.